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Education Policies and Practices to Address Cultural Diversity : an Assessment of Malaysian Schools

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Education Policies and Practices to Address Cultural Diversity:

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The government of Malaya was faced with the challenge of transforming the British educational system into an indigenous system. The post-independent Malaysia had adopted the vernacular schools approach from the British to cater for the educational needs of the Malays, Chinese, and Indians, who formed the major groups of the population. Nevertheless, it introduced Malay as the national language and main medium of instruction, and curricular reforms to reflect Malaysia's history, geography, culture and economic activities. At that time, national unity was somewhat taken for granted. The 1969 civil war altered the strategic position of the government towards education. The realization was that education had to be coupled with the socioeconomic restructuring of the society; hence, the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1970. However, in due course, the new policies were perceived as favoring mainly the indigenous people, which further deepened the divide among the races. In the past decade, specific policies to harness racial unity have been put forth such as the Vision School, Student Migration Plan for Unity, Civic and Citizenship Education, Race Relations education, and most recently, the 'One Malaysia' concept for inclusion. Analyzing the impact of these policies on national unity would help to unravel the nature of relationship between them.

Key words: Education policy, national unity, racial integration, multiculturalism, inclusion.

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**Education Policies and Practices to Address Cultural Diversity:
an Assessment of Malaysian Schools**

Abstract: The relationship between education and national unity in Malaysia can be put into perspective based on the policies and practices that were introduced before and after 1969, when a racial riot put the efforts of the government to build nationhood at peril. The earlier policies were essentially transitory and transformational to recreate the British educational set up into an indigenous system. The post-independent Malaysia had accepted the vernacular schools approach from the British to cater for the educational needs of the Malays, Chinese, and Indians, who formed the major groups of the population. Nevertheless, it introduced Malay as the national language and main medium of instruction, and curricular reforms to reflect Malaysia's historicity, geography, culture and economic activities. At that time, national unity was somewhat taken for granted. The 1969 civil war altered the strategic position of the government towards education. The realization was that education had to be coupled with the socioeconomic restructuring of the society; hence, the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1970. However, in due course, the new policies were perceived as favoring mainly the indigenous people, which further deepened the divide among the races. In the past decade, specific policies to harness racial unity have been put forth such as the Vision School, Student Integration Plan for Unity, Civic and Citizenship Education, Race Relations education; and most recently, the 'One Malaysia' concept for inclusion. Analyzing the impact of these policies on national unity would help to unravel the nature of relationship between them.

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Introduction

Cultural diversity in schools in Malaysia has to be viewed in the context of both the macro- and micro- perspectives because of the demographic nature of the population which is racially and ethnically mixed, and socio-economically spread widely between the rich and poor and urbanites and rural folks. The macro-perspective would refer to the broader national level initiatives while the micro-perspective to the school level interventions and activities.

The racial mix of the population came as a legacy of the British rule over Malaysia, which lasted close to two centuries until the declaration of independence in 1957 for Peninsular Malaysia, and constituted at the time: Malays 50%, Chinese 38%, and Indians 11% (Abdul Rahim, 2002). Malays were the indigenous people of the country, and Chinese and Indians were the immigrant counterparts from their ancient homeland, who had arrived as traders, entrepreneurs, and indentured laborers, but became an integral part of the Malaysian society with citizenry rights conferred by the national constitution. The racial and ethnic mix further increased when the natives of Sabah and Sarawak (East Malaysia) added to the numbers upon the formation of a confederation of Malaysia of the three countries in 1963, together with Singapore and Brunei which two countries later opted out of the agreement. As of 2009, the population of Malaysia was 27.7 million making it the 43rd most populous country in the world. Indigenous Malays and natives of Sabah and Sarawak constitute 66.8%, Chinese 24.5%, Indians 7.4% and others about 1.3% (Statistics Department Malaysia, 2009).

Historically, Malaysia has been essentially an agricultural country. With the arrival of the British, commercial activities such as rubber plantation, cultivation of exportable crops such as cocoa and oil palm, lumbering, and mining were commenced. But, the hardcore industrial and urban development began only in the 1970s. The growth was very rapid and by 1990 the country attained international recognition for modernization and industrialization. Nevertheless, a large part of the country still remained as rural. These factors and conditions led to disparities in the socio-economic development of the general population.

This study reviewed how Malaysia had fared with the predominant challenge of providing education to its people with diverse demographic background that was dispersed inequitably

status of the country was duly recognized and accepted as a reality, a national level strategy had to be formulated and implemented for the various racial groups to co-exist as a nation. The foundation was initiated through the conception of an indigenous schooling system. In 1956, the Razak report was prepared that spelt out the role of education to address the potential immediate issues of the new nation. The report recommended that over a period of time the Malay language as the national language of independent Malaysia became the official medium of instruction and communication, and the concept of a standard curriculum across all subjects was introduced in all schools. The English, Chinese, and Tamil schools would continue to co-exist in the new education system but would accept the common curricula and teach the national language as a compulsory subject. The key ingredients of the Razak Report were re-examined in 1960 and findings were filed as the Rahman Talib Report that reiterated the willingness and agreeability of the people for the early education policy of independent Malaysia.

Thus, the process of creating a system of universal education for national unity and identity commenced with the attainment of independence. Beginning from 1957, as a symbolic gesture of the new education policy, all primary schools in the country were converted to national and national-type schools. The Malay medium schools were endorsed as the national schools and others as national-type schools. In 1958, the Malay medium secondary schools were commenced, which had the capacity to eventually replace the English and Chinese secondary schools that had developed during the British rule. In 1962 as the schools became fully (national) or partially (national-type) assisted under the government fold the government abolished the payment of school fees that was imposed during the British rule especially for the English schools. Education became virtually free for all children regardless of racial background. Also in 1960s, the government eliminated the entrance examination to secondary schools called the Malaysian Secondary School Examination or Standard Six Examination, which move enabled the offering of universal education from six to nine years, up to the lower secondary level. Another major policy change in the Malaysian education that commenced in 1960s was the standardization of the all school curricula.

The new Malaysian government enjoyed great success in the implementation of policies of universal education and common curricula. It had also gained greater control of all the schools through the school assistance scheme. Next it took up reforms in the curricular content

with the objective of building common Malaysian perspectives and indigenous points of view that culminated in the implementation of common content examination in all schools. In 1964, the government set up the General Syllabus and Time Table Committee to formulate the common content curriculum for all subjects. The committee constantly revised the syllabuses and amended as necessary, and in some cases devised new ones. These changes and reforms that the government implemented during the early years of independence aggregately enabled the emergence of a comprehensive education system up to the lower secondary schooling by the mid 1960s.

Political and socio-economic influence on education

The Malaysian politics also had its roots in the race-based party-line development during the colonial rule. The Malays sponsored the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), Chinese set up the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA), and Indians created the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) each of which stood up for the interest and welfare of its own community. (The tendency of race-based party politics had become a wedged reality in the political arena of the country, although other parties emerged in later years that claimed and aimed for non-racial representation of the people.) For the purpose of attaining independence from the British, the three parties joined hands under negotiated terms and conditions of a broader umbrella party known as National Alliance or "*Barisan Nasional*" however, historically, it did not a consultative power to influence the policies and directions of the government, which role was more fulfilled by UMNO.

In 1969, Malaysia, especially Peninsular Malaysia, witnessed a large-scale nasty racial riot. The Malays and Chinese engaged in armed confrontation the effects of which affected all of the occupants of the peninsula. It was claimed to have been caused by an intensely felt socio-economic imbalance among the various racial groups. According to Abdul Rahim (2002), the educational policy and developmental plan of the colonial rulers led to a disparity of educational opportunities between and within the major ethnic groups and also emphasized the social and economic inequalities between the Malays and non-Malays. Until the eruption of the racial riot the lurking racial grievances and tension and the detrimental impact on national unity was never suspected. Beginning from 1970s through 1980s social and economic issues started to dominate Malaysian politics and governmental agenda. Reinstating racial harmony and trust and eradicating social and economic imbalances and poverty among the people were crucial for

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the process of nation building, and the government formulated the New Economic Policy (NEP) coupled with constitutional amendments to achieve them (Jomo, 2004; Lim, Gomez & Rahman, 2009). The Malaysian education responded to the call of NEP by re-orientating and reformulating its initiatives to gear towards the socio-economic imperatives of the nation. Thus, a more equitable education leading to a fair opportunity of employment for all became a necessary catalyst for the continuance of national development.

The 1970s and 1980s were a period of absolute dynamism and aggressive achievements for Malaysian education. There was a tremendous amount of change and rapid expansion of the policies and practices, and large investments were made to increase educational facilities, infrastructure, and opportunities. There was a greater momentum and concerted effort to convert the medium of instruction to the national language throughout the education system and by 1983 it was achieved at the level of university education. In Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah, English ceased altogether as the medium of instruction at the primary level in 1975, at the secondary level in 1982, and university level in 1983 (Ministry of Education, 2001). In Sarawak, the transformation began in 1977. Today, the Malay language is the medium of instruction in all national schools and a compulsory subject in the vernacular Chinese and Tamil schools. English is taught as a second language in all schools. In 1980, the Malaysian Certificate of Education examination was conducted wholly in Malay language.

At the same time, expansionary and enhancement activities were carried out on the administrative machinery of the Malaysian education system to enable the government to facilitate the many strategies of NEP where education served instrumentally. The move towards curricular standardization and unification with Malaysian identity was consolidated by the establishment of the Curriculum Development Center in 1973 that continued to review, evaluate, and develop all school curricula in line with national goals. The School Library Services Unit under the Schools Division and Educational Television were also launched about the same time. A textbook loan scheme was also made available.

The provision of education that aimed at access and opportunity for all children began to move from clustering around urban centers into rural areas. More schools were built in the rural areas bringing education to the living places of the rural and economically disadvantaged children. In order to expand and improve the infrastructure of educational access and opportunity a number of fully residential schools, special science schools, and rural school

hostels were built. They were augmented further by the Textbook Loan Scheme and with Educational Television, more appealing scholarship schemes, and school meal and health programs (Ministry of Education, 2001).

National vision and education

In 1990s, Malaysia found itself drawn into a new and more competitive field of operation. By then the country had attained the status of an industrialized nation. The fast pace of globalization and modernization had caught on with its industrial growth and socio-economic reforms, coupled with the unprecedented power of information and communication technology (ICT). Malaysia once again reiterated and re-augmented its course of nation building and development, and devised the National Vision 2020. The National Vision 2020 was a comprehensive ideology and strategy as to how the country could surge forward to acquire a fully developed nation status by the stipulated year. The vision meant that Malaysia had to make a quantum leap of adapting and accommodating to a globalizing and modern world and keep pace with the ever-unraveling technological development. From the education point of view, Vision 2020 meant building a world-class education system that would be dedicated to producing a world-class workforce. Aptly, the Ministry of Education repositioned itself with a new mission: "To develop a world class quality education system which will realize the full potential of the individual and fulfill the aspirations of the reforms and institutional changes." And, in order to establish the legal grounds for all of the transformation initiatives, the Education Act 1961 was replaced by the Education Act 1996 to regulate the furtherance and expansion of the educational developments. A material amendment of elementary education resulting from the new Education Act was the incorporation of pre-school education into the national educational system. By incorporating pre-schooling into the education system the provision of early education could reach all children on equal terms.

Also in the 1990s, circumstantiated by the Educational Act 1996, there was further integration of the education system at the levels of primary, secondary and tertiary education. Taking center stage was the increased access to tertiary education with the setting up of a number of public and private universities, university-colleges, matriculation colleges, community colleges, private colleges, as well as foreign university branch campuses. The Malaysian education at last was able to build a complete infrastructure with abundant educational institutions and facilities to enable children of all ethnic and socio-economic background to

pursue tertiary education within the country and possibly at a nominal cost. After the completion of the upper secondary schooling, and depending on their performance in the common public examination, students may be streamed to academic, professional, or vocational disciplines where they may continue with matriculation, higher secondary, or polytechnic courses with the option to enter universities with required qualification or opt out for job markets.

Micro-perspective policies and reforms

For most part, the Malaysian school system had been designed to also tackle the micro-perspective or school level issues of the demographic differences. To begin with all schools have to conform to the rule of enrolling students of any background, cultural or otherwise, as long as they come from within certain geographical vicinity of a school, and providing them with equal and universal treatment. There is a standard uniform concept throughout the nation's schools. Student distribution into the different streams of courses such as science or arts, and allocation of places in classes and awarding of government aids in terms of the Textbook Scheme are done according to prescribed conditions, and not on any preferential criteria. Appointment of positions such as class monitor, and leadership and office bearers in co-curricular activities such as the board of prefects are carried out by a majority choice of the respective student-groups.

As in academic subjects, participation in co-curricular activities has been made mandatory for all students. Each student will have to become a member at least in three of the uniform and non-uniform clubs taking active part in certain percentage of the activities for the year thus increasing the chances of interaction among various groups of students. A lot of emphasis is also given to social services and out-door activities such as excursions and camping thus creating opportunity for the students to socialize. Where the student number warrants, own religious sessions such as prayer before examinations are sponsored. In the same token it is important to note that Malaysian education in schools pays a great deal of attention to the spiritual development of students without compulsion on any denomination. For the Muslim students the schools conduct religious classes and for non-Muslim students run Moral Education as a compulsory subject. The propagation of universal values taken irrespective of any intellectual and spiritual tradition or geographical reference is also intensely practiced. Some secondary schools have commenced the teaching of foreign languages

depending on popular interest such as Japanese and English which also pave the way for talking about other cultures.

The micro-perspective policies and strategies to address the demographic differences and cultural diversity are not without challenges. The national population distribution does not tally with the racial composition by region across the country. There are numerous schools especially in the remote rural areas that are enrolled only by the Malays. Where there is a racially mixed student population the range of Malay to non-Malay students may vary broadly. Naturally, questions arise how the government could standardize or come up with alternate ideas and interventions with regards to curricular and co-curricular activities, cultural practices of schools, and approaches to teaching and learning.

Another major policy that the government introduced in 1995 called "Vision School" came about to address the isolation of the vernacular schools from the mainstream school practices. Accordingly, the Vision School would house a Malay, Chinese, and Tamil medium school in the same compound or campus without affecting the integrity of their operations. The government viewed that the renewed context of the Vision School would provide the children of the different races the necessary physical proximity and space to mingle, and create the opportunity for them to adapt to differential mentality. The explicit policy statement on the Vision School was that it would foster racial integration, harmony and unity among the different ethnic/racial groups (Ministry of education, 1995).

The Vision School concept essentially required that the participating schools shared common amenities and physical facilities such as the games field, multi-purpose hall, cafeteria, etc. and took part in each other's celebration of cultural events and festivals. Otherwise, the individual schools would abide by their business of teaching and learning as usual. They would have their own headmaster and teaching and administrative staff who would not be affiliated to the member schools in any official way. They would have the same curriculum as the regular schools and would teach the non-language subjects in the respective vernacular language.

Challenges ahead for the government

Over the past 53 years of independence, the Malaysian government has certainly covered extraordinary feats in the reconstruction process of its education system from an historical mould, taking into consideration the vast and deeply entrenched demographic differences.

Today, Malaysia has positioned itself as an education-hub in the region of South East Asia with international student population rising each year. But, it is for higher education. At the schools level the government is still faced with a number of challenges on accord of which it is not able to attain a full-potential growth in terms of its student outcome. There are some sparks of excellence when a few students secure admission to high ranking world class universities in the United States of America and United Kingdom after twelve years of local education, but the number is small.

It is with great interest that the government upholds the right to design the character of Malaysian schools that befits the endeavors of nation building. Obviously, a tremendous amount of inclusivity thinking has taken part in the formulation and implementation of education policies and practices for the younger generation. However, there are implicit disparities in the system that the non-Malays dispute as not-wholly inclusive which could have contributed towards adverse race relations (Mahat, 2002). Those disparities might have emerged as necessary schemes under the NEP to uplift the socio-economic status of the indigenous people who as pointed out constitute the largest percentage of the population. The much attention gaining issue has been the dual pathway in pre-university education. The Malay students who perform well in the eleventh year public examination are systematically streamlined to a one-year matriculation education in which non-Malay students are allowed limited enrollment; non-Malay students typically have to go for a two-year Higher Secondary School Certificate, which creates an undue advantage for the former such as making them seniors to their classmates in schools and enabling them to enter the job-market sooner. Moreover there is a discomforting perception among the parents of the non-Malay students that the two-year pre-university education does not get as much attention of governance as the matriculation system, and the number of students enrollment for it is declining over the years.

Another view of inclusivity in Malaysian schools is that it deals largely with the physical and material aspects and not adequately with cultural aspect of it which should give due recognition to the heritage and historicity of the various races. There is a perception especially among the non-Malays of lopsidedness in terms of racial representation in favor of the predominant group. Perhaps, Malaysian education has to go multicultural because of the diverse nature of its population so that there is a general sense of fairness, equity, and social justice. The multicultural package has to be comprehensive and cover all areas of the

educational elements such as curriculum, pedagogy, textbooks and workbooks and supplementary material, and assessment (Malakolunthu, 2009; 2010). Ideally, for the multicultural education program to be truly successful there may have to be only one format as was done for the common curriculum initiative during the early years of independence regardless whether a school has mixed or homogenous student population. However, an inherent issue of implementing universal multicultural education across the system will be the religious and vernacular schools because of the extremely sensitive reaction they would fetch from the public, activists, and special interest groups. The government will have to face an immensely huge, and possibly boisterous, task to work around the sensitivities of the people. In the same token, the government may have to find a compromise soon enough between the national and national-type school status, which may have been a historical and, in due course, technical necessity during a previous time but now causes the affected parties to perceive it as discriminatory in terms of awarding funds, fringes and benefits to the schools. There are cases where a national school with only 115 students has been located adjacent to a national-type school with a student population of 2000, and national-type schools with a student number of less than 10 in remote rural areas. They do not make sense of economy-of-scale when considered in relation to the number of administrative staff and investment and maintenance cost.

Malaysia also has a sizeable number of aborigines who are closer to the nativity of the country but do seem to enjoy an independent demographic status. The 'Education for All' policy should effectively cover the aborigines as well. While the government has undertaken a number of programs and made investments to bring them into the mainstream school education, its efforts have not firmed up success in a big way. A broader scheme may be necessary to bring them into the fold of larger society.

Finally, as much as it may sound academic, even the issue of the English language as the main medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics has become an issue of inclusivity in the Malaysian schools. In 2003, the then prime minister reintroduced English language for the teaching of Science and Mathematics in order to make entry into the knowledge economy. It was argued that the move would enable the country's intellectual capital grow on par and in line with global development. In 2010, the policy was reverted to instruction in Malay language in view that the relatively large rural population was in a disadvantageous position to cope with

English medium of instruction. The policy was to take effect in 2012. The move was being considered by the urban population as a huge set back for the country's economic as well as human capital development. The urban people argue that rather than reverting to teaching in Malay the government should sponsor support and facilities for the learning of English language in the rural areas.

Conclusion

Malaysia's experience of developing a national education and school system in the context of a racially mixed population is certainly noteworthy. Historically, it catered both for the educational needs and native inclinations of the indigenous population as well as the needs and citizenry rights of immigrant people who are themselves ethnically different. And, through the years, it has geared its efforts and policies and practices towards nation building. Today, Malaysia may proudly claim ownership of a matured education and school system that is working towards achieving greater lengths and heights. However, it is not without challenges. So far, its successes have been in physical and technical transformations, which should continue to aim to transcend towards a more culturally, socially, and spiritually integrated system. There are specific issues of disparities, inadequacies, and inequalities that the government will have to resolve, and soon enough either through decisive action or non-action. A major decision that the government will have to deal with will be the status of the non-Malays whether to continue to regard them as "immigrants" even after several generations or assimilate them into a common society as Malaysians. Accordingly, it will clog or smoothen the continuous development and enrichment of Malaysian education, hence the country.

Hopefully, the most recent "One Malaysia" concept introduced in 2009 by the current Prime Minister will help Malaysian education transcend the cultural divide and disparities and build a nation that truly practices multiculturalism. The serious and concerted effort to infuse and practice the 'One Malaysia' core values that include the principles of 'acceptance', 'nationalism' and 'social justice' in every aspect and arena of education can bring about positive outcomes in the attainment of multiculturalism, inclusion, and thus national unity.

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